

## **QRFU 1943**

### ***QRFU Background***

The Quebec Rugby Football Union had an auspicious start and played an important role in the early history of organized football in Canada from the time it was formed in 1883. For the next 24 years, the QRFU competed against the Ontario rival ORFU for the Dominion Championship. The purpose of the QRFU was to replace individual “challenge matches” with a more regulated schedule, and thereby provide a bona fide representative to compete for the national championship. The strength of the league rested in Montreal, and throughout most of its existence, the best teams, attendance and league management all centered there. The Montreal Football club dominated the early years, remaining undefeated through 1887, in fact. This dominance eventually led to the loss of other outlying teams and kept the league largely to a four team structure. In 1907, after numerous championships, the Montreal Football Club left the QRFU and became the entry in the new senior “Big Four” which also included three of the best ORFU teams. The QRFU limped on, but without the Montreal team, was strictly a intermediate league and unable to compete for the Dominion Championship, and later, the Grey Cup.

### ***QRFU During the Second World War***

In 1937 an attempt to re-start a senior level league in Quebec ended with a 63-0 playoff loss to Sarnia of the ORFU and the QRFU returned to its intermediate aspirations. However, during World War Two a number of service bases and depots sprung up around Montreal, and with the Big Four having suspended operations, there was a football void even though a number of football players were gathered in the immediate area, many in uniform. As a result the QRFU was once again re-born as a senior league, composed of service teams (army, navy, air force) plus McGill University (the collegiate competitions were also suspended) and a civilian team known as the Verdun Grads. This senior league reincarnation once again competed for the Grey Cup and existed in 1943 and 1944- essentially as long as there were enough servicemen to fill the team rosters, and no competition from the dormant Big Four.

In 1942 the QRFU, struggling in a wartime economy as an intermediate league, saw their average attendance drop to 100 spectators per game. The league was built around Montreal neighbourhood teams plus two service teams, RCAF and Army. The latter teams dominated play due to the limited pool of civilian football players in the Montreal area. With the suspension of collegiate and senior play due to the war, the supply of young recruits from the former and veterans on their way out from the latter, the quality of competition suffered. The year got off to a shaky start when one of the air force teams, No. 1 Wireless School withdrew because of a lack of equipment in October 1942.

As the 1943 season approached, the league decided that the answer lay in the problem: mobilize the large number of players who had enlisted and were based in and around Montreal. Adopting the model used in the ORFU and the west (in places with high concentrations of service personnel like Winnipeg) the QRFU worked with the local military bases and was soon able to put together three service teams: RCAF Lachine, Huntington Army, and Navy (HMCS Donnacona).

To this initial group was added a civilian team called the Verdun Grads, comprised of experienced players in the Montreal area drawn from the original neighbourhood teams. To further bolster the league a university team, the McGill Redmen was added. Under coach Doug (Pops) Kerr, the university kept their football program intact after the suspension of collegiate play in 1940. National champions in 1938, the Redmen had been reduced to inter-squad games by 1942. The QRFU presented a unique opportunity -universities had relinquished their right challenge for the Grey Cup in 1936, but now through the vagaries of wartime, the McGill side was back on the trail. The addition of a university team caused problems for the league in that allowing for late enrolment dates tryouts and practices, the Redmen would not be ready for competition until mid-October. The rest of the league was to start play in mid-September. The solution was to stage the season with a unique staggered start. McGill would begin in mid-October, but since the other teams would have played six games by then, McGill would play a limited schedule of four games (one against each opponent), but a win in a McGill game would be worth four points (later raised to six)in the standings rather than the traditional two.

Another problem arose when the QRFU registered with the CRU (Canadian Rugby Union) as a senior league, and thus eligible to compete for the Grey Cup. The service teams were prevented from playing outside the province by regulation, and the Redmen were restricted by a similar collegiate agreement. Therefore, the only eligible team to compete at the next level– playing the winner of the ORFU in the eastern Canada championship - would be the Verdun Grads. And what if they did not win the QRFU championship – a distinct possibility given the strength of the RCAF and Navy teams?

These problems would have to be resolved during the course of the season, and the league began play on September 11 1943 with a doubleheader at McGill's Molson Stadium. The Montreal Navy team which featured an airtight defence led the league through the early stages. However it was soon evident that the RCAF team was an offensive powerhouse, and would average 16 points a game, far above the norm for the era. Both were closely pursued throughout the season by the civilian Verdun Grads.

The effort involved in completing a season with such different teams, and the burden of fluid rosters was considerable. Shortages meant that games were re-located, re-scheduled and usually presented as double-headers when possible. The Navy head coach, Glen Brown, had to insert himself into games at his old guard position upon occasion, and gate receipts did not adequately cover expenses. However the participation of the service teams was deemed to be good for morale and possibly recruitment, and the league soldiered on (sorry!). A number of players just out of high school were on most of the teams, and given this early chance to play at senior level displayed skills that would later carry them on to post-war success. This group included Joey Richman, Murray Hayes, Alan Mann, Tex Dawson, and Benny Steck. Some veterans of the pre-war senior leagues and college stars were sprinkled among the teams, such as Red Storey, Ron Perowne, Johnny Fripp and Alec Jacobs. The league MVP, however, turned out to be a

recent high school graduate who would go on to fame as one of the best hockey players in history, Doug Harvey of the Navy team.

The Navy team started strongly and played well enough to seem to be assured the league championship but ended up 3<sup>rd</sup> as the RCAF team gained strength and reeled off seven straight wins to claim the top spot. Pre-season favourite Verdun Grads also overtook the Navy team and finished second with a 7-3 record. The Army team, comprised of largely inexperienced players was doomed to a winless season, scoring only 30 points in losing all 10 of their matches. The McGill team played only 4 games, but due to the odd arrangement where their games were worth 6 points, they were in contention almost to the end, before finishing fourth with a 1-3 record in their first competitive season since 1939.

The finish was so close, however, that a week before the season ended the league had been faced with the prospect of a three way tie for first, with no official tie-breaker in place. However when McGill had narrowly lost to the RCAF team by a 7-6 score, that concern evaporated.

The issue over a non-league champion being dispatched to Ontario for the Grey Cup semi-final had also been avoided when the service teams and McGill had acquired the dispensation required to travel outside Quebec for the match. Thus league champion RCAF Lachine went to Toronto to play the heavily favoured Hamilton Flying Wildcats, and almost upset them in a 7-6 thriller. Those same ORFU Wildcats went on to win the 1943 Grey Cup.

### **1943 QRFU results**

Sept 11	Verdun 13, RCAF 6	Navy 8, Army 6
Sept 18	RCAF 18, Navy 0	Verdun 31, Army 0
Sept 25	Verdun 8, Navy 1	RCAF 19, Army 0
Oct 2	Navy 3, Army 2	RCAF 26, Verdun 9
Oct 9	Verdun 6, Army 1	Navy 12, RCAF 6
Oct 11	Navy 1, Verdun 0	RCAF 28, Army 5
Oct 16	Navy 24, Army 1	RCAF 21, Verdun 6
Oct 23	Navy 10, McGill 3	RCAF 16, Army 9
Oct 30	McGill 16, Army 0	Verdun 2, Navy 1
Nov 6	RCAF 7, McGill 4	Verdun 12, Army 6
Nov 13	RCAF 14, Navy 2	Verdun 3, McGill 1

### **QRFU Standings**

	GP	W	L	PF	PA	Pts
Lachine RCAF	10	8	2	161	60	20
Verdun Grads	10	7	3	90	64	18
Montreal Navy St. H.D.	10	6	4	62	60	16
McGill	4	1	3	24	20	6
Huntington Army	10	0	10	30	163	0

*Note: McGill games counted for 6 points*

**Head Coaches:** Lachine: Bill Hughes. Verdun: George Elson and Ted Edwards. Army: Lt. Phil Shaughnessy, Navy: Glen Brown. McGill: Doug "Pops" Kerr.

## **1943 Google Newspaper Links**

[Grads Top Navy 8-1](#)

[RCAF Gridders score over Army](#)

[Grads Hold Practice](#)

[RCAF 3-2 win over Army](#)

[Airmen wallop Grads 26-9](#)

[Navy winners 24-1 over Army](#)

[RCAF defeats Verdun Grads 21-6](#)

[Navy takes over QRFU lead](#)

[Lachine Wins Over Huntington](#)

[Grads, RCAF still threaten](#)

[Verdun Edges Navy 2-1](#)

[McGill wins 16-0 over Army](#)

[Grads down Army](#)

[Airmen edge McGill 7-4](#)

[Airmen whip Navy to win QRFU title](#)

[Grads top McGill, take 2<sup>nd</sup> place](#)

[Doug Harvey wins MVP award](#)

[QRFU Leading scorers \(final\)](#)

## **QRFU 1944**

At the conclusion of the 1943 season, the league looked forward to repeating its new-found success as a CRU senior league. However the Huntington Army team indicated they would not be coming back, citing travel difficulties as well as the problem of maintaining a roster. The four Montreal area teams remained, and a new schedule was drawn up and CRU sanction for 1944 was received. However, the service teams began to experience problems over the summer, most seriously in RCAF Lachine. The returning champions were forced to withdraw from the league when the decision was made to convert the base into a returning airmen depot, and thus significantly changing the number and type of airmen available (airmen assigned to the base were mostly there for a 30 day demobilization period). As in 1943, McGill's late registration would force them to join the season in October, and play "four or six point games as part of their abbreviated schedule. The loss of the RCAF team left the league with a schedule with significant holes in it. As a result the first scheduled game between Montreal Navy ( a "Combines" team drawn from HMCS St Hyacinth and HNMCS Donnacona) played the Verdun Grads on September 16<sup>th</sup>, and then went into hiatus until the scheduled re-match between the same two teams on October 9<sup>th</sup>. McGill joined the fray on October 21<sup>st</sup>, and played four straight games, two against Verdun and twice versus Navy. Verdun was the pre-season favourite, based on the roster tumult on the service teams, and the youth and inexperience that the McGill team would have to overcome. They beat Navy in the league opener, but that was their only win and they ended up in third place. McGill was a surprising second, based on two wins over Verdun with Montreal Navy coming out on top with only one loss.

To fill out the gaps in the schedule, both the Navy team and the Verdun grads played exhibition matches. Verdun traveled to Ottawa to play the Trojans of the ORFU, and lost. A similar result occurred when the Navy team travelled to London to play the University of Western Ontario Mustangs.

Since the ORFU and QRFU were the only leagues to register for the 1944 Dominion championship, The Montreal Navy team played the ORFU champs, and defending Grey Cup winners, the Hamilton Wildcats. Before a dismal attendance of 3,871 The Montreal team posted a major upset of the Joe Krol-led Wildcats of 7-6 in Hamilton. It would be the last time two eastern teams competed for the Grey Cup, the last service teams to be involved and the last time attendance was below 10,000. By the fall of 1945, the Second World War was over, the service teams disbanded, the Big Four and WIFU resumed operations and the path to the Grey Cup began to resemble the current format.

### **1944 QRFU results**

Sept 16	Verdun Grads 6, Montreal Navy 1
Oct 9	Montreal Navy 13, Verdun Grads 1
Oct 21	Montreal Navy 16, McGill Redmen 6
Oct 28	McGill Redmen 7, Verdun Grads 0
Nov 4	Montreal Navy 27, McGill Redmen 5
Nov 11	McGill Redmen 11, Verdun Grads 10

### **1944 QRFU Standings**

	GP	W	L	PF	PA	Pts
Montreal Navy	4	3	1	57	18	6
McGill University Redmen	4	2	2	29	53	4
Verdun Grads	4	1	3	17	32	2

**Head Coaches:** Glen Brown (playing coach): Navy. George Elson: Verdun. Doug "Pops" Kerr :McGill.